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Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our Universities: One Size Fits One

Standardized measures never capture the essence of anything, although they provide dimensions: length, width, and depth – descriptions — but not essence. Tests, grades, and performance measures devoid of dreams and desires are gibberish. Measures are frail rhetoric and detrimental in isolation or abstraction.

“If my future were determined just by my performance on a standardized test, I wouldn’t be here. I guarantee you that.”

Michelle Obama, February 18, 2008.

On August 22, 2013, President Obama shared his plan to tie student aid to performance ratings of colleges, a version of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), maybe with the moniker *Fewer Forgotten Freshmen* (FFF). Both efforts should be applauded for attempting to squeeze better performance out of educational institutions.

I visit with many families and students about career and study options. An instantaneous, albeit cryptic, analysis of the student’s propensity to perform based on their class rank, ACT score, GPA, and the array of courses taken and many other factors, is carried out. Based on the student’s record and aspirations, community college — to test the waters of challenge, performance, and fit at 15 cents on the dollar — is sometimes recommended.

Even while concurring with Mrs. Obama’s observation too few admissions officers say, *“We would like to accept the student but his ACT score is too low, as are his class rank and GPA. His chances for success are low. Without informing him of this we violate an assumed trust.”* Federal loan dollars provide access for students and operating funds for institutions, but not one iota of reassurance regarding success without accompanying student aspirations and professional judgment by leaders, faculty and staff.

Simple and honest one-at-a-time assessments would go a long way in addressing student indebtedness and institutional quality. It may be the only cure: One size fits one.

While well-intended, President Obama’s plan does not require intentional professional judgment regarding a student. In fact, it further insulates institutions from needed professional responsibility to individual students. Mrs. Obama knows this. The proposal provides another degree of separation between teacher and learner. Separation of responsibility and result is the enemy of excellence and effectiveness.

People blame ineffectiveness up. Students blame faculty or parents. Faculty blame deans who blame presidents. Presidents and boards blame statehouses. Statehouses blame Washington for the decreasing availability of student aid. Soon, we can blame FFF. This sickly sequence of blame is a barrier to the essence of educational excellence, authentic responsibility from educators towards students and their dreams.

Accountability from universities is rightly demanded. And like charity it should start at home.

The US News and World Report (USNWR) annual assessment of universities provides some basis for accountability. The “rankings” have value for the information contained in them as a means to share attributes and qualities, but only when coupled with firsthand experience, honest self-assessment, and clear personal aspirations. To its credit, USNWR cautions readers to never select universities solely through its analysis. Too bad too few universities exercise similar honesty when accepting students with loan money in tow, commitment and aspiration left on the dock, and promise for performance a pipedream.

Distraction from the real issues of quality, efficiency, and effectiveness occur if leaders, mesmerized by the mirage of authenticity in measurement, follow this plan. The discussion will prove of great value, but the rest will be Coleridge’s albatross. NCLB, good intentions and all, resurrected.

In our universities, performance and cost must be measured and reported. University leadership knows what makes a university work. Courage, honesty, and leadership must be integrated. Good institutions, the marketplace, and Michelle Obama know one size never fits all.

Mr. President, talk to your wife. Please.